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Taking treaty with grain of SALT

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Washington.

Seven years developing, the domestic SALT debate is simmering down to a primary issue—something called verification. In plain language, it centers on the ability of the United States to determine whether the Soviet Union cheats.

It may not be the most important issue, though who is to say? Many opponents of SALT—for strategic arms limitation treaty—argue that the crux of the matter is simply the strategic situation the treaty will dictate, even if both sides observe it impeccably. On balance, they say, the United States ultimately will be vulnerable to Soviet attack, and thus inhibited in its political decisions.

The basic numbers of SALT read simply. Each side will be limited, until 1985, to 2,250 strategic launchers. But there simplicity ends. Within that total there are various sublimits on types of weapons, on launchers with multiple warheads, on colossal weapons—that last the Soviet SS-13's, which the U.S. will be forbidden to match.

According to the hard-liners, this adds up to jeopardy for the United States. Most who make the argument do not then suggest—though some do—that SALT must be scrapped so the United States can surge ahead. Hardly anyone thinks American superiority, once unquestioned, can be recreated. Instead, those who oppose SALT most resolutely would demand concessions in Soviet weaponry that the Soviet

Union surely would reject. That, they say, would not be a disaster.

Even more important criteria for judging SALT may be a series of abstractions. What does "essential equality," the basis of SALT, mean to a world that has respected superior power for centuries? Will the nation overtaken be judged to have lost its drive? What are the consequences for President Carter, who produced the treaty, flawed or not, after others conceived it? And what are the implications for the United States, at home and abroad, of what promises to be a colossal struggle between the executive and the legislature?

Almost no one discusses the debate in those terms. But no participant can escape them. They will color, acknowledged or not, every position adopted.

By comparison, verification is by no means simple. But it does not concern a basic restructuring of U.S. defenses. It does not involve obscure philosophies of politics and power. It is critically important. For merit and convenience, it may be, for both sides, the best channel for a fundamental test of political will.

The central concern, of course, is that the Soviet Union might, through concealment or evasion, suddenly display overwhelming superiority. President Carter says it can't happen.

"We have insisted," he declared recently, "that the SALT II agreement be made verifiable. We are confident that no significant violation of the treaty could take place without the United States detecting it."

"SALT II is not based on trust," says a White House position paper. "The agreement will be adequately verifiable from the day it is signed, based on the sophisticated means we use to detect what the Soviet Union is doing in its strategic programs."

But the hedges in that language are obvious, and skeptics have engraved them in the debate. "No significant violation" and "adequately verifiable" are subjective phrases, short of certainty. What does "adequately" mean?

It means spy satellites overhead, planes skirting borders, radio and radar receivers across the land and at sea. Presumably it means agents risking their necks from time to time, though no one has mentioned that. It means that SALT II forbids any interference with systems used for monitoring—the so-called "national technical means of detection"—and any deliberate concealment that would impede verification.

But no one can argue that even the best possible performance by all these safeguards provides certainty at all times. At most, the administration can and does say that the margin of uncertainty is held to a tolerable level.

What is tolerable to the administration, however, is intolerable to many members of the Senate. Not all of them are right-wingers reflexively opposed to arms control. Their skepticism has been sharpened by events severely damaging to the administration case.

By far the most important was the fall of the shah of Iran. The revolutionary government that succeeded him promptly closed two electronic listening stations from which the United States had monitored Soviet missile launches. Objectively, the damage to American monitoring capability was severe.

The administration then fumbled its public relations in the aftermath. First, Adm. Stansfield Turner, the director of

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